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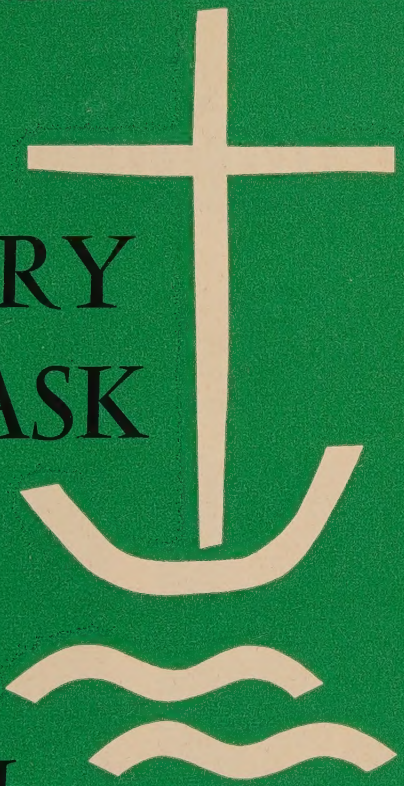
THE MISSIONARY TASK OF THE CHURCH



THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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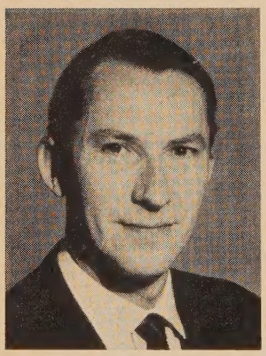

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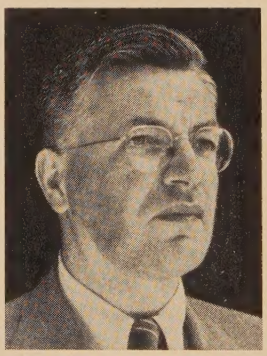

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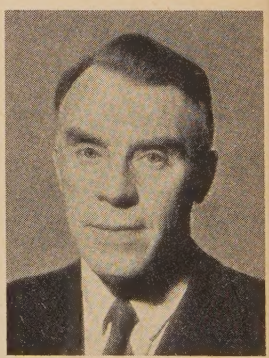


Rev. Victor E.W. Hayward, IMC

Theological Reflections on the Missionary Task of the Church

THE Department of Missionary Studies jointly run by the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches has been engaged for some years in a study of "The Word of God and the Church's Missionary Obedience". As part of this study, Dr. J. Blauw was asked in 1959 to make a survey and critical appraisal of theological work during the past three decades having a bearing upon the Biblical doctrine of the Church's mission to all the nations. The first draft of this book, as well as other documents, was used in a series of consultations held in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America during 1959 and 1960. In these participated theologians, Younger Church leaders, missionaries and mission administrators, of many nationalities and confessions, different categories of participants preponderating at different conferences. Dr. D. T. Niles, General Secretary of the East Asia Christian Conference, was requested to write a book setting out, in the light of Dr. Blauw's findings and of the reports of these various consultations, his own answers to the problems raised in this study. This book was to be addressed to concerned Christians everywhere.

As a further part of the plan, a Commission was specially appointed, and met in July 1961 for ten days at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey. It had the double purpose of considering the theology of Dr. Niles' draft, and of making its own report to the Third Assembly on points of theological agreement reached and on issues calling for further study. Those who participated in the work of

this Commission were Professor Colin Williams (Chairman), Dr. Wilhelm Andersen, Professor Tetsutaro Ariga, Dr. Johannes Blauw, Dr. Chow Lien-hwa, Professor Nils A. Dahl, Miss A. L. Fransz, Dr. Walter Harrelson, Dr. J. C. Hoekendijk, the Rt. Rev. A. M. Hollis, the Rev. C. H. Hwang, the Rev. E. B Idowu, Professor R. Martin-Achard, Professor Carl Michalson, the Rev. E. W. Nielsen, Dr. D. T. Niles, Dr. N. A. Nissiotis, the Rev. Philip Potter, Dr. James A. Scherer, Dr. David M. Stowe, the Rev. Dean M. F. Wiles, Dr. John H. Yoder, Dr. Robert S. Bilheimer, Dr. Hans-Jochen Margull, the Rt. Rev. Lesslie Newbigin and the Rev. Victor E. W. Hayward. Dr. Niles has borne in mind various recommendations from this Commission while preparing his book for publication early next year. Dr. Blauw's work has already been completed, and is to be published shortly under the title of "The Missionary Nature of the Church". A report will be made to the appropriate committee of the Third Assembly regarding the issues in this field of study which the Commission felt should be further pursued. What is here presented is the document in which the Commission set out the agreements reached in its discussion of this subject.

Of the seven "omnibus" questions dealt with, the first is of vital importance because the contemporary crisis of Christian missions calls for interpretation of the Christian understanding of history itself. The second is equally important because the claims to uniqueness and universality made by the Christian Gospel are deeply challenged today by secular culture, by resurgent religions, and by prevalent syncretistic tendencies. The third, fourth and seventh questions represent problems which must of necessity be taken up in any attempt to rethink missions in an ecumenical age. The fifth and sixth questions were dealt with because the dominance and challenge of social structures and behaviour patterns are so great that consideration of their relation to the missionary task seemed inescapable.

Some members of the Commission reported their opinion that its deliberations had been hampered by neglect of the subject of the Church and the Jewish people. Since this issue had not been fully discussed in the preparatory stages, apart from Dr. Blauw's presentation of Biblical theology, it was found that time was too limited to give it adequate treatment. The Commission agreed that a study of this subject, in relation to the mission of the Church to the nations, is urgent. The sponsored agency of the IMC which has this special concern is to become an integral part of the new Division of World Mission and Evangelism, as its Committee on the Church and the Jewish People. Its help will be sought in future consideration of the profound theological issues which this subject raises.

The Commission's document follows :

Introductory Statement

1) During recent years both the pace and the revolutionary character of world events have made it difficult even for reflective students of history to keep

their bearings. In carrying out its missionary task the Church has experienced the same bewilderment. It has in fact found it difficult to keep in clear focus its own understanding of the nature and practice of its mission.

2) The conventional lines of missionary activity have been radically challenged. Some lands have been closed to foreign missions. In many others, the break-up of colonial systems has brought about a fundamentally new situation for the Church's missionary work. New nations have come into existence and, in spite of difficult circumstances in several instances, have entered upon their independence with great hope, vigour, and enthusiasm. A reappraisal of the place of the Church and of missionary activity within the life of these new states has become necessary.

3) The shock caused by certain terrible events of the Second World War (saturation bombing in Europe, and nuclear bombing in Japan) has been felt as symbolizing destructive forces emanating from the Western nations and giving evidence of their bankruptcy. Totalitarianism, racial conflicts, and the continuing political and economic clashes of the Cold War have been further indications to many that the so-called "Christian" world does not possess the resources of faith with which to resolve its own problems. "Missions" have shared in the general discrediting of the colonial era. In consequence, the reconciling function of the Christian world mission has in some cases been repudiated, and in others sharply curtailed. There have been situations in which this has been reflected in suspicion and tension between the Churches themselves.

4) These revolutionary developments have inevitably been charged with mass emotion. On one side, this is directed against the status quo, especially in the struggle to achieve freedom from colonial rule and economic dependence and in the fight of the coloured peoples for dignity. On the other, it is directed towards the future, reaching beyond release from poverty and misery, and the more immediate goals of political and economic developments, to the vision of national fulfilment and spiritual destiny. Such high-powered emotion brings irrational elements into men's attitudes and actions, but also creates tremendous new possibilities.

5) The incredibly rapid expansion of technology and industry, and the universalizing of various arts and philosophical ideas, are together producing a unified secular civilization which is literally world-wide. This is an unprecedented factor in the history of mankind. Demand for change and betterment in society, and recognition of the supranational character of scientific and technological achievements, with their power of producing unified forms of life, have become universal. The unity of mankind resulting from these developments puts all peoples and nations in a number of ways on the same level.

6) The emergence of new Churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and their active participation in the life and mission of the Church throughout the world, represent a new fact of profound importance and potentiality for the Church's mission. Through the Ecumenical Movement, their influence has been extended far beyond their own borders. Their call to unity in mission in face of those missionary efforts which contradict that unity cannot be ignored. Missionary activity which rests upon the notion of 'sending' Churches in one area of the world, with 'receiving' Churches in another area, has been fundamentally challenged.

7) Biblical and theological scholarship has also taken a number of new directions during this period. From that side alone, a fresh attempt to understand the mission of the Church has become urgent, and an example of this can be seen in the WCC document 'A Theological Reflection on the Work of Evangelism'. But when this rethinking of the Church's mission is set amidst the radically altered circumstances in which the mission is empirically pursued, something of the dimensions of the task of study becomes evident.

8) It must be emphasized that this particular report must not be isolated from other studies which, along other lines, are contributing to the total task of reconsideration. In particular, we would draw attention to the WCC study of Christian Responsibility in Areas of Rapid Social Change. This Commission, however, has limited itself to certain crucial issues relating to the practice of missions which have come into focus over the last few years through the processes of consultation in missionary circles. These questions, in the context of the actual situation giving them their urgency, have been brought into relation to recent Biblical and theological studies. This procedure has been based upon the belief that problems in the theology of mission and vital questions of missionary policy need to be considered in mutual relatedness.

I. *What is the relation between the Course of the Gospel and what is going on in the world? What is God's redemptive purpose in and for world history? What do we expect as a result of missions?*

1) At the beginning of the present century, belief in the steady progress of world history gave men a generally optimistic frame of mind. It already seemed possible to descry a time when ignorance and disease would be universally overcome, when human relations would be ruled by justice, and when nations would live in peace and mutual co-operation. The outbreak within less than half a century of two World Wars, the second of which in particular was marked by inhuman cruelties and mass destruction previously regarded as unthinkable in an enlightened age, correspondingly plunged many into the

depths of despair. Today, such optimism and such pessimism both appear as out of date. A sober view prevails, more in accord with the Christian view of man and of human history.

2) It is superficial to assume, on the basis of these terrible events, of the relative decline in the proportion of Christians to non-Christians in the world, or of the hindrances experienced in Christian missionary work, either that the whole idea of Christian missions was a mistake, or that they are no longer a necessary part of the Church's obedience.

3) Evil remains, and will remain,as a fact to be reckoned with, until in His own time and in His own way God brings to consummation His purposes for man. Because evil is present, the course of human history, though not outside of God's control, cannot be in itself the perfect expression of His purpose.

4) The foundation of our Christian understanding of existence and of human destiny is that God is both Creator and Redeemer. He reigns as Lord over the universe and over all the acts of sinful men and nations. God both controls and saves. And in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ, God has decisively intervened.

5) In the preaching of the advent of God's Kingdom, Christ called the world to obedience to God. Through His obedience to the point of death, Christ brought the mercy of God to sinners. In His victory over death, He broke the power of evil. God in Christ has made men His sons and heirs, giving them responsibility for His world. An end has been put to uncertainty as to the world's meaning ; the myths and ideologies which have intimidated and enslaved men have been exposed. By revealing that it is Christ Who is and Who will be Lord, God has shown that it is in His hands that the future lies. Men may therefore live their present lives free of care.

6) Through His Holy Spirit, God has called out a people, the Church, to enjoy and to communicate to others the benefits of this new age inaugurated through His work in Christ. The struggle which the Church must continue with the evil in the world is carried on under the promise of certain victory. The real meaning of history is given only through the consummation which Christ will bring. Looking to this consummation, and knowing that God is at work in the revolutionary changes of life, Christians are called to take full part in the struggles of history. This they do in order to reveal their faith in God's ultimate victory, and to show forth the signs of that victory in their battle against every form of injustice and every force which threatens the dignity of those whom Christ came to save.

7) As God's people thus make their pilgrimage through the centuries, their life is inextricably involved with the whole life of mankind, with the rise and fall of nations, empires and civilizations. They have no detailed map of their journey ; they walk by faith towards God's appointed end. Their calling is to make manifest

by word and deed, in every time and place, the sovereign love of God in Jesus Christ. As they fulfil this vocation, they become both a source of peace and an occasion of division. Their witness brings blessings which flow far beyond the circle of those who accept discipleship, through imbuing society with ethical standards and through inspiring concern for cultural values and human welfare. But that same witness also becomes an occasion of rejection and hostility — hostility which uses at times the very blessings brought by the Gospel to deny the Lordship it proclaims.

8) That the preaching of the Gospel and the demonstration of its power call forth a corresponding manifestation of the opposing force of evil should neither surprise nor dismay the Church. God's sovereignty is unshaken ; He uses even His enemies to set forward His purposes of judgment and mercy. The Church's task remains that of faithful witness, and Christians can with a good courage join issue with their opponents. In the last resort, the Church's strength lies in suffering endured with hope, and prayer offered in persevering love. There is no smooth progress towards the end, but constantly renewed occasions when men are challenged to decide for or against Christ, and are thus confronted by history's ultimate question.

9) Because the path of this pilgrimage leads to a real end, the Church, in thinking about its mission, must pay attention to the place where it now is. Today it faces a situation in which, for the first time, all the peoples of the world are being drawn into the orbit of a single type of culture, in part derived from beliefs about man and the world that have their origin in the Biblical revelation of God's purpose. These same beliefs are precipitating revolutionary demands which old political and social structures are incapable of meeting, and creating revolutionary ferments which threaten to destroy much of what Christian missions have built up, and to close the path at certain points to the familiar forms of missionary action. Further, other religions, whose resurgent power is in part due to truths they have appropriated from the Christian faith, are more strongly challenging the total claims of Christ, and making their own new bid as missionary faiths and world religions.

10) At such a point in our journey, we have to ask where the Lord of history is leading His Church and His world. If new messianic movements arise, offering to mankind, in some name other than that of Jesus, the total healing and the peace for which men long, this should be no matter of surprise to Christians. The Church is neither to fear nor to surrender itself to such promises and claims. Christians must accept penitently the judgment of God thus declared upon their own unfaithfulness. It is not through them, but through His Messiah, that God will finally establish His Kingdom. But the Church knows that God is at work within the events of history, and that He calls His people to participate

in the struggles of life in the name of Christ, so that through their obedience — whether in partial victories or in faithful defeat — they are enabled to be signs of the ultimate victory of Christ. Whether here and now the churches are given power, wealth, and great numbers, or whether they have to serve in weakness, poverty and contempt, is for their Lord to determine. They must hold steadfastly to their task of witness, rejoicing that, if need be, it may be more clearly and faithfully fulfilled in suffering. Among every people the Community of the Church must be seen as signifying and testifying to that new creation in Jesus Christ which God has set as the goal of human history.

II. *What is the meaning of the Christian claim that there is salvation in "no other Name"? What is the uniqueness of the Christian message and the necessity of preaching it? Does missionary work aim always at conversion?*

1) The Bible speaks of salvation as an *activity* of God. The Good News of God's salvation is that God is drawing all men to Himself in Jesus Christ. Christ is the saviour of all, and there is no other. The emphasis of the Bible's message of salvation is upon the positive word that the world's saviour has come in Jesus Christ.

2) The motive of missions is to present the saviour of the world to all men, because He *is in fact* the Saviour. The urgency of missions derives from this fact. The world's saviour is at hand, but many do not know Him and have not received Him. The world looks for joy and freedom and peace, and these are even now at hand, awaiting our reception of them through Him.

3) The motive of missions is not to be located in a belief that the lack of explicit faith in Jesus, or the absence of baptism in His Name, automatically determines a man's final destiny. We cannot make any such assertion. Yet we know no other saviour than Jesus. We cannot be diverted from the task of proclaiming Him by the fact that other "saviours" and other ways of "faith" are proclaimed.

4) We affirm the finality and the all-sufficiency of the salvation given by God to men in Jesus. The ultimate meaning of life is found only in Him. We are ready and eager, none the less, to hear and to examine all statements of life's meaning, and to learn from any quarter how God may be at work among men. We recognize, moreover, that the form and manner of our witness to Him need correction from those who do not name Him as saviour. We must always stand ready to receive such correction, and indeed to seek it. The churches are not to insist that only through their own witness can Christ make Himself known, but they must never leave to others the witness to which they are themselves summoned.

5) The Church must recognize that it will, in fact, be judged by the unbelieving for its unfaithfulness. Thus Christ warned the men of His generation that when they were on trial on the Day of Judgment, the Queen of the South and the men of Nineveh would appear against them and ensure their condemnation, since they had made a response to the wisdom of Solomon and to the preaching of Jonah, which Christ's own people failed to make to One who was greater than either of these.

6) Believing that God has made known in Jesus Christ the mystery of His will to save all men, we affirm that Christians are bound to confront men with the decision to commit themselves to Him. We are required to make clear that this decision is a matter of life or death, that the call of the Gospel is to full and abundant life here and now, and that those who decide for or against Jesus are not the same as they were prior to this decision. Decision for Christ does involve being baptized and taking a place in His Church. We are not in a position, however, to say that those who refuse to make this decision have rejected Christ.

7) When we speak of judgment, we must always remember that the judge is the saviour, and that He is the Jesus whom we know. God alone can perceive the real standing in relation to Christ of those who refuse baptism and church membership. It is no part of our Christian responsibility to anticipate God's final judgments or to speculate upon the question as to who will be saved in the End.

8) The Saviour's love and redemption are displayed through acts of love, no less than through the message of the divine love. In some circumstances, a verbal witness to the Gospel may be impossible. Yet some kind of testimony remains possible in every situation. A silent or a suffering testimony, as well as active works of love, may show forth the salvation of Jesus for all men. Those who bear such testimony may certainly hope and pray for the conversion of others, even where they do not have the opportunity to seek it openly. "Christian long-suffering is a matter of steadfast patient endurance in a hope set upon the Day of Jesus Christ... The secret of endurance (hypomene) is abiding in the command of Christ in His ever-new royal law of love. Instead of hatred, hopelessness and despair, this means the love of enemies, intercession and blessing for those who hate and abuse us." ("The Lordship of Christ over the World and the Church" — WCC Study Document, 1959.)

III. *Are missions which cross national and cultural boundaries a permanent or a temporary part of the Church's obedience to God? What is the meaning of the term "nation" in the Bible, and what are its implications for the Christian mission? Is the crossing of sociological boundaries of the same theological significance as the crossing of geographical borders? Does the existence of a Church in a nation eliminate the necessity to send missionaries there?*

1) There is one Gospel, and it requires faithful witness to all men, to the ends of the earth. The task is one, and its pursuance is always a necessary part of the Church's obedience to God. Every frontier, of whatever kind, has to be crossed in the fulfilling of this commission.

2) The term "nation" is used in sufficiently broad ways in the Bible to warrant its application to peoples in their total linguistic, social, cultural and religious settings. The witness of the Gospel must be made to men as they actually are, within the groupings of nation, community, occupation, culture and religion in which they actually live. The whole structure of meanings found in such groupings is an inseparable part of the lives of those who live and work within them, and must be taken with full seriousness in the missionary task. It must be recognized, moreover, that these groupings and settings are always subject to change, and that witness to the Gospel must also take account of this.

3) Neither sociological nor geographical boundaries are of ultimate theological significance for the mission of the People of God, since Christ has broken down the walls which separate men and groups from one another, and is fashioning one new humanity. It is, however, important for the Church accurately to identify those boundaries which empirically separate men from each other, since only so can the strategy of its missionary task be effectively directed.

4) The Church is sent into the world, in order to gather men from every nation into the one household of God. While therefore it is an essential part of the strategy of mission for the Church to identify itself with men in their separate "groupings", in such a way that the Christian faith takes form within the particular cultural forms of their daily life, it is equally essential that the transcendent character of the Church as a supranational, supraracial and eschatological community be made clear. The Church of Christ, wherever and whenever it is found, has to exhibit the same marks of being the One People of God, with one constitutive history behind it, and engaged on one mission to the ends of earth and to the end of time. For that reason the mission of the Church requires both that measure of identification with men in their groupings which enables them to hear the Word of God in their own "tongue", to worship God within their own world of symbols and emotions, and to discover the way of obedience to Christ within the peculiarities of their own life, and also that measure of transcendence over the barriers that divide groups of men from each other, which will witness to the power of Christ to unite all things in one in Him.

5) Although the Church, in some form, is already to be found today in almost every land, the missionary work of the Church is by no means fulfilled. Before it lies a vast unfinished task. Nor is the Church's understanding of

the Gospel complete, for its full relevance to the needs of men can be discovered only as the Gospel is carried into more and more of mankind's multitudinious communities. A deeper and more creative apprehension of the will of God will result, as Christ's breaking down of all barriers is both realised and expressed in the sending and receiving of men and women between churches in different communities and lands who recognize and accept a common missionary calling, in fulfilment of which inter-church aid is directed to world mission.

6) The missionary himself is a symbol of the unity of the Church across all human boundaries, and also an agent of the universality of its mission to the whole human race. He further signifies the truth that in the Gospel there is always an element of strangeness — it can never be completely at home within any culture or civilization. Yet the missionary's task is always to protest against the "ghetto" mentality, for through his crossing of boundaries he challenges the churches to ever fresh encounter with the world.

7) Difficult problems arise where one church believes itself called by God to undertake missionary work within a region where another form of the Christian Church already exists, with which, because of differences in belief or practice, co-operation seems impossible. We recognize that every church "is not only permitted but required freely and openly to bear its witness in the world". Yet every effort must be made to help the church already there "towards its renewal and the strengthening of its own witness and ministry" ; the giving of inter-church aid for mission is preferable to "establishing a competing mission of some other church". This subject, in its complete context, has been carefully dealt with in the 'Revised Report of the Commission on "Christian Witness, Proselytism and Religious Liberty", 1960', from which these phrases have been quoted. We wish to support the general line of thought in that document.

IV. *What is the meaning and validity of the concept of a specific "missionary calling" of certain individuals? What does this mean in practice for the individual?*

1) The Church as the Body of Christ has a single mission. Every Christian, when he is baptized, is placed within this community of the Spirit, and receives a gift for the common good which constitutes a calling to participate in this one mission to the world.

2) Fulfilment of a specific "missionary vocation" involves the crossing of a boundary (in the sence indicated in III above) in order to be used by the Holy

Spirit to bring men of some other linguistic, social, cultural or religious group to faith in Christ. The missionary is called to a real measure of identification with the community to which he is sent.

3) In the exercise of this vocation, the missionary represents the whole Church ; other members of the one Body are called to use the gifts which the Spirit has severally given to them, not only in making their own witness, but also for the strengthening of him and of his work.

4) The Church as a whole is under constant obligation to identify the boundaries to be crossed, to recognize and understand changing needs, and to present these to its members. It must seek to discover those who may be specially gifted for specific missionary service, and to set before them the call to this particular form of witness. It must do all in its power to open the way for obedience to this calling. Where a person believes that he has such a vocation (no matter how it may have come to him), the Church must test him and, if satisfied, provide adequate preparation.

5) Those who believe themselves called to be missionaries have increasing opportunities to go to other countries, in a variety of occupations, without being directly related to mission agencies. The Church should clearly recognize the validity and importance of this type of missionary call. Where, in particular instances, the Christian community feels able to confirm the reality of this vocation, the church from which such a missionary comes, and the church to which he or she goes, should be prepared to encourage and assist the fulfilment of this vocation.

6) It should be further noted that, in a world in which new social groupings are constantly forming, and in which Christians are moving about in their secular occupations as never before, the possibilities of lay witness constitute the Church's greatest opportunity to penetrate new areas with the Gospel. It is essential that laymen should be helped to recognize this fact and to accept the full implications of their baptism. The churches must develop ways of preparing them for effective participation in the one mission.

V. *In what way does the missionary proclamation of the Church involve a social witness?*

1) Our central conviction is that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the world. He has conquered the "principalities and powers" which, like "the elements of the world", represent the structure of the universe in this present age. These

"powers" which rule the world have all been made subject to Christ. Yet wherever loyalty to Christ is lacking, they enslave men through winning false loyalties, by which men are alienated from God and from their divinely-appointed destiny.

2) The Lordship of Christ requires Christians to bear witness in matters of social structure. The right form of such witness in each particular situation can be perceived and made only as the Holy Spirit gives them insight into the meaning of that Lordship through their struggles to be obedient to it within the concrete problems of their own society. But in general, this witness is made through the very existence of the Christian community, and by its approving, questioning or challenging the patterns and practices of society around it, as well as by involvement of Christians in social responsibility.

3) In the missionary message itself, the Lordship of Christ over social structures and social change must be clearly proclaimed, as also this inescapable social obligation of Christian discipleship. In the contemporary world, political, social, economic and racial affairs play such a dominant part in the lives of men that the relevance of the Gospel to human life must be demonstrated in these spheres.

VI. *In the missionary task of the Church, how can the preaching of the Gospel and the teaching of patterns of behaviour be so related that salvation is not made to appear the result of conformity to such patterns?*

1) When the Gospel is preached, we should be fully aware of the difficulty of translating its absolute demands into the relative goals of ethical behaviour, whether social or individual. Relative social patterns are not to be confused with the Gospel itself. On the other hand, it is essential that the church in each community develop its own understanding — as contrasted with any imposition even from other churches outside that situation — of the relation of the Gospel to the social problems it faces. Thus it must not be assumed by those who come as missionaries to a society where, for example, polygamy or caste is an integral part of the social structure, that the abandonment of these things should be made a prior condition of entrance into the Christian community. Indeed, the danger must be recognized that any pattern of social or personal behaviour as a qualification for baptism can be enforced in such a way as to obscure the truth of justification by grace through faith.

2) Patterns of behaviour are a necessary element in the teaching of the Church. They arise from insights discerned from life under the Gospel, but remain always subject to its judgment. In every situation churches have to bring their patterns

of behaviour into constant dialogue with the Gospel, in order to be open to discover new ways by which their life may be brought nearer to the way of Christ. Some social problems are more complex than others and involved highly relative choices; the bearing of the Gospel upon other problems is clearer and more direct. In either situation, the Christian must act, but patterns of behaviour should not be set in too rigid a form, lest men become victims of legalism. Rules of conduct should be worked out and presented in such a way that they can be accepted as a true and necessary response to the Gospel of Christ. The goal of all such teaching must be seen not simply as the maintenance of an external standard of conduct, but as the furtherance of life in the Spirit.

3) Church discipline has as its purpose the development of the life of the Christian community, so that it may grow up into fuller participation in the life of Christ for service in the world. Discipline must be understood as the nurturing of discipleship. The motive of any corrective discipline must be love for the person, with a view to his restoration to full fellowship and growth in grace, never simply the preservation of the respectability of the church.

VII. *What are the organizational consequences for missions of our understanding of the unity and mission of the Church? In the practical life of the churches what should be the relation of church structures and missionary agencies?*

1) In spite of real progress, it must yet be strongly said that the present structures of our churches and mission agencies contradict in many ways the reality of the Gospel and the missionary nature of the Church. On questions of the proper relation between church structures and missionary agencies there is deep confusion.

2) Two truths must be stressed:

a) That the essential unity of the mission of God's People to the world implies that the Church is called to be both wholly committed to its mission — all churches accepting responsibility for participation in it — and also one in its mission — all churches seeing themselves as the one People of God in their witness to His one purpose for the world. "Foreign missions" are not an entity which can be separated from the general life of the churches. The missionary concern should infuse every part of each church's life.

b) That the churches' task of reaching out across the frontiers of nation, community, occupation, culture and religion does necessitate organization.

3) Between these truths there is a necessary tension which is the occasion of many dangers and temptations. The danger for the churches is that they should regard responsibility for these missions as marginal to, and separate

from, the whole life of the whole Church. The danger for the missionary agencies is that they can come to accept this marginal status as normal, to cease challenging the whole Church to missionary commitment, to fail responsibly to represent the whole Church in mission, to monopolize the channels of inter-church relations, and to overestimate the importance of organization.

4) Historical prejudice, vested interests, power realities, make all of us to some extent prisoners of attitudes and institutions that prevent our expressing real partnership in obedience and decision, in which "giving" and "receiving" are transformed into "sharing". Through our unfaithfulness, we have not been seized by the urgency for renewal, reform and mutual participation in mission. Often it is a desire to dominate (masked from the persons themselves by rationalizations about responsibility to see that resources are properly used) which stands in the way of renewal and witness. Here often it takes the form of an anxiety to protect, which reflects a lack of trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to guide His people and to enable them to grow through the acceptance of responsibility. In "receiving" churches the obstacle to obedience may be a subconscious desire to remain dependent, membership in the church being felt as something that confers advantages which wealthy partners can provide, rather than being recognized as a call to responsible witness to the surrounding world. Because of these and other factors, the channels of missionary action become rigid, and prevent free response to present situations. It is thus idle to suppose that correction is simply a matter of improved organization. Only a deep response of repentance can give us the necessary freedom for obedience to Christ.

5) Given the desire to amend our ways, certain lines of action would seem to offer possibilities for reform :

a) The relationship of agencies and churches in one region with those of another need to be such as to facilitate joint decision. The decisions required concern not only the "receiving" churches. There is a self-sufficient attitude on the part of traditionally "giving" churches which prevents them from seeing that they must also be "receiving" churches — open to judgment and conviction regarding their vision of Christ's will, and open to the sharing of responsibility for witness in their own regions.

b) There must be a readiness to see that schools, hospitals and similar institutions, which in one period were a vital part of witness to Christ the Servant Lord, can often be disengaged from the life of the church, when secular agencies arise to accept responsibility for these tasks, in order to leave the church free to move on with its witness into further areas of need.

c) More flexible structures may be developed through periodic strategy conferences in the areas where churches and missions must witness together, in order to lead to responsible redeployment of resources. There must also be freedom to move on towards unity in these regional settings, even where the parent churches are as yet unable to find the way to unity.

6) A warning must be given against the dangers of both a wrongly-conceived confessionalism and a wrongly-conceived ecumenism. In the Christian life a tension is experienced between the truth of the Gospel and the unity which the Gospel requires. A legitimate concern lies behind the development of world confessionalism — the demand that truth be not swept aside in the concern for unity. A wrongly-conceived ecumenism which seeks unity of witness without a clear statement of the Word of God as it must be proclaimed in the present situation, invites confusion and further fragmentation. On the other hand, a legitimate concern is equally felt by those who oppose some of the tendencies of present world-confessionalism. This is wrongly conceived when it seeks to guard the truth of the Gospel by holding a confessional battle-line from the past, instead of allowing inherited confessional treasures to make their contribution to a new united confessional witness in the present.

Four needs have to be taken into account:

a) The need for witness to be made to each region and situation in its particularity, calling for unity of witness in that area.

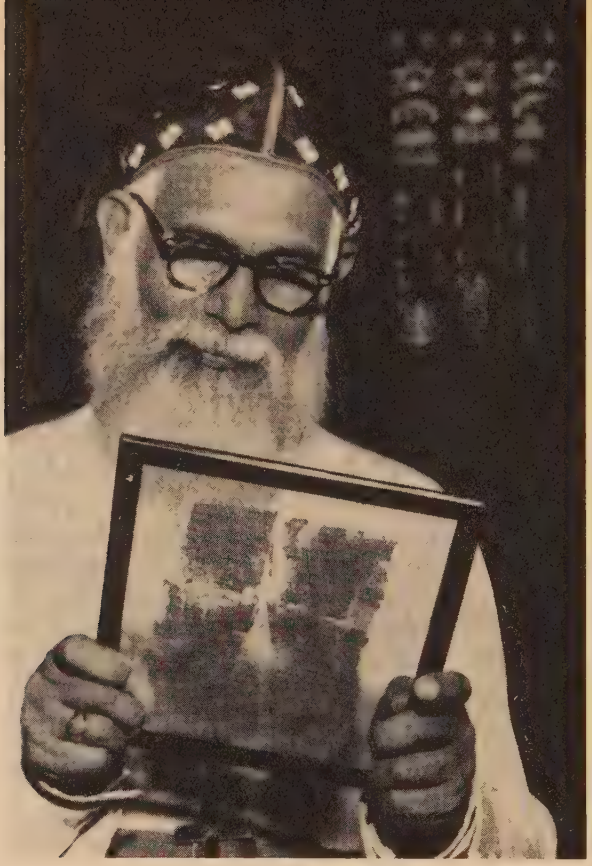
b) The need to seek unity in witness on the basis of a clear statement of the Word of God.

c) The need to reveal the "catholicity" of the church by witnessing to Christ's power to transcend all regional and cultural divisions.

d) The need for churches to receive correction from each other, under the Gospel, as they seek to fulfil their missionary tasks.

World-confessionalism is a reminder of the importance of *b)*; but when its legitimate concern is met at this point, it must be reminded of the importance of *d)*, that it can give only a broken witness to *c)*, and can stand as a serious barrier to *a)*.

7) Joint action between regional areas must not lead to a world bureaucracy. A delicate balance is required between responsible decision in the localities and regions where the witness is carried on and joint decision and action between regions, a balance which symbolizes Christ's power to transcend human divisions and which makes possible a sharing of resources. For this task of interdependence and sharing, decentralized regional agencies, as well as centralized agencies for limited purposes, are essential.



DURING the course of the meeting of the Commission on "The Word of God and the Church's Missionary Obedience", it became apparent that the hermeneutic problem was of fundamental importance in seeking understanding and unity of conviction on the subject at hand. It was noted that this has been a frequent occurrence in similar theological commissions. The Commission asked two of its members, Prof. Nils Dahl of Norway and Dr. John Yoder of the USA, to prepare a statement for the use of the Commission on this subject.

This statement, warmly commended by the Commission, follows, and is offered separately in this form because it is thought that it may have substantial usefulness in other ecumenical theological discussions.

THE HERMENEUTIC PROBLEM

I. The Background of the Problem

(a) *Earlier experience with the problem*

Dealing with the theme, "The Bible and the Church's Message to the World", the ecumenical study conference held at Wadham College, Oxford, 1949, accepted a statement of "Guiding principles for the Interpretation of the Bible". The Commission studying "The Lordship of Christ over the World and the Church", in its last meeting at Arnoldshain, 1959, pointed to the need for "careful re-examination" of the problem of hermeneutics. Other study commissions, e.g. the Theological Commission of Faith and Order on Tradition and Traditions, have recognized the importance of the hermeneutic problem in all ecumenical conversations. The present survey aims to identify the problem involved, insofar as possible without indicating any answer.

(b) *Traditional forms of the problem*

The hermeneutical problem is by no means a new one, though the issues involved have not always been dealt with under this heading. The scholarly techniques of interpreting a particular text represent only a small portion of the problem area. Such headings as "Scripture and Tradition", "Scripture and Confessions", "Theologia regenitorum" are essentially hermeneutical. Ancient or contemporary traditions, ecumenical and denominational creeds, the spiritual experience of individual believers, or such principles as the Reformers' distinction between Law and Gospel all serve as guides for the interpretation of Scripture.

(c) *Contemporary forms of the problem*

In both biblical research and systematic theology the central importance of hermeneutics has been seen with increasing clarity, so that it has been called *the* methodological problem of Theology — (see Art. Hermeneutik by Ebeling in RGG [3]). The discussion of "existential interpretation" is but one of the current illustrations of this fact.

Summarily, the task of hermeneutics may be described as stating the principles according to which the meaning of the Bible in its original setting and "language" (understood very broadly to include social, cultural, religious and intellectual backgrounds) is to be grasped by the reader in a contemporary setting and "language". The task is thus threefold : it calls for the analysis of the original "language", of the contemporary "language" and then of the transition between them.

II. Types of Approaches to the Problem

(a) *The denial of the problem*

It is possible to assume or to argue that, by virtue of the perspicuity of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit, no conscious attention need be given to the techniques of interpretation, and that the techniques of interpretation, and that the text of Scripture is best left without note or comment. It must be seen that this itself is a hermeneutic option, since the simple repetition of the same words in a new context is itself one way of interpreting them. This attempted denial of the problem renders conversation difficult by avoiding the identification of underlying presuppositions.

(b) *The Canon within the Canon*

It is possible to argue that within the total message of Scripture some one passage, book, doctrine, or emphasis is central and provides the key to the understanding of the rest.

(i) This "key" may be chosen on the grounds of an immediate and unrationalised awareness of its centrality ; thus the Reformers chose the message of justification by faith, and more recently others have chosen the prophetic proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

(ii) Or this "key" may be identified by critical studies, on the basis of which it may be argued that this portion is the most primitive (the "kerygma" or the "earliest confessions") or that it represents the way in which the biblical writers themselves interpreted and modified the materials they used in the course of the creation of the biblical literature.

The general problem of the relationship of Old and New Testaments can also be seen in this light.

(c) *The canon outside the canon*

Various historically established criteria from outside Scripture itself may be attributed determining authority for interpretation. Such may be said of the teaching authority of the Church Universal, whether located in the universality of tradition or in papal infallibility; such authority may be attributed to

creeds, written or unwritten ; or some other source of insight and conviction (reason, the scientific world view, the "Spirit") may be allowed to regulate how we understand the Bible. Likewise any systematic hermeneutic approach, insofar as it expresses a given philosophical orientation, may prejudge exegetical or systematic decisions.

III. The ecumenical Significance of this Problem

(a) *The hermeneutic rootage of diversity*

The very existence of a variety of churches and denominations illustrates this problem. These different churches find support for their varying positions within Scripture, partly because the Scriptures themselves do not provide a simply uniform body of teachings ; they reflect the diversity of experiences and expressions within the life of Israel and of the apostolic church. Does this mean that continuing denominational diversities are justified ? Or can one "most valid" line be found within Scripture, beside which other biblical affirmations are considered less authoritative or even rejected ? Or is there some other solution ?

(b) *The impact of critical scholarship*

The rise of critical scholarship (historical and linguistic) has affected in all churches the way we approach the Scriptures. Though the detailed results of such study are subject to change, and views may differ concerning the utility and the authority of the critical disciplines, the new approach and the questions it asks are here to stay.

We are all driven thereby to distinguish — consciously or unconsciously — between biblical theology and dogmatics, between the historical exegesis of a given passage in its original setting and theological interpretation of its meaning for the Church today. This observation may be illustrated by the high degree of agreement reached by Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars concerning the original historical meanings of biblical texts, due to the common use of scholarly methods ; — an agreement which seems thus far hardly to affect our relations as members of different church bodies holding conflicting views. The old problems of "controversial theology" therefore need to be restated in a modern framework, so that we can see the relevance of our common exegetical findings. This is again a hermeneutic task.

(c) *The furthering of conversation*

Hermeneutics may contribute significantly to the clarification of the major issues of substance in ecumenical encounter. In such encounter the use of linguistic and semantic tools is both more unavoidable and more effective in ecumenical encounters than in other contexts. The broader perspective of the conversants, as well as this analysis of the concepts used, help to clarify whether supposed arguments of substantial nature may rest upon simple differences in the use of their intellectual tools. This clarification may further assist the conversants to see at what points, even within their own traditions and disciplines, they have been relying on unclear concepts and unexamined slogans.

IV. The special significance of hermeneutics in the missionary task

If we have understood hermeneutics as the search for principles to guide the transfer of meanings from one cultural setting to another, and mission as the crossing of cultural frontiers with the biblical message, the hermeneutic problem is both more basic and more complex in the missionary situation than within the bounds of one church.

(a) *The triangle of interpretation*

Instead of reading the Bible in the polarity of the biblical and the contemporary contexts, the missionary must deal with two modern contexts ; one in which he himself has understood the Scriptures in the past, and another to which he brings them and seeks to make their message meaningful. What place has the cultural context of the sending church (including its past hermeneutic efforts, creeds, traditions) in determining how the missionary shall read the Bible in the new context ? Conversely, what place has the culture to which the missionary goes (including its past efforts to understand itself and its life), in releasing previously undiscerned depths of meaning in the Bible's message ?

(b) *The creation of tools*

In the case of most institutional missionary enterprise in the past, the missionary has represented a culture which had been under Christian influences long enough to have developed certain tools of thought, including not only specifically meaningful words (trinity, agape, mercy, mission, ...) but also broader concepts and thought patterns (the sense of history, the sense of objectivity in dealing with truth, a self-conscious awareness of the difference of modes of thoughts) which aid in biblical interpretation. In another culture and language where such tools do not exist, must the missionary patiently await their development ? Or may he import those which have served well elsewhere ?

In return, might the difficulties of interpretation in a new framework not point the older churches toward a need to re-examine the adequacy of their traditional tools ?

(c) *From faith to unfaith*

The discipline of hermeneutics has traditionally been carried on within the Church and therefore under the presupposition of faith. When the missionary or evangelist addresses unbelieving men, is this also within the scope of hermeneutics ?

(i) It may be argued that all of Scripture bears the Gospel, so that in the communication of its message the attitude of the hearer is not determining. Then the hermeneutic problem would be the same as within the Church.

(ii) It may be argued that the "Kerygma" or "Gospel" represents only one portion of Scripture, so that the evangelist is an interpreter, selecting and communicating only this portion. The evangelist himself has a very special hermeneutic task, and the missionary situation provides unique reason to ask with great care what this selected message should include and what it should not.

(d) *Translation and transposition*

In all times and places, preaching itself and in fact all biblical interpretation have consisted largely of paraphrasing and recasting biblical affirmations in the language and thought forms of a changing culture and changing world views. Within older churches such a recasting process goes on continuously, never signifying, however, a total break with earlier patterns. In the missionary situation, where the difference between two "languages" is greater and the movement from one to the other is made all at once, can we identify any maximum or minimum limit to the necessary liberty of rephrasing ?

(i) Is the rather free way in which biblical writers seem to have used images, phrases, and forms from the surrounding religions and cultures an example for us in this respect ?

(ii) On the other hand, might certain elements of the Bible's language or "world view", or of the historical traditions of the Church, have an unchanging and normative significance for all cultures and languages ?

V. The importance of and the criteria for the study of hermeneutics as an ecumenical task

(a) This study has its full earnestness only in the ecumenical context ;

(i) Only a full acquaintance with all the variety of views held within the churches can indicate how profound is the need for common criteria for interpretation and conversation.

(ii) Only the ecumenical commitment to encounter one another before the bar of Scripture makes imperative an answer to this question, and a rejection of ultimate relativisms.

(b) There can be no one final hermeneutic system :

(i) because one of the poles with which every interpretation deals is the cultural setting within which the Church understands the Bible, a setting which changes constantly, especially because of the Church's missionary obligation ;

(ii) because its tools are only developed in the process of their use, so that the movement from issues of substance to questions of method is continuous and circular.

We must however believe that sufficient common understanding can and must be reached to permit the other tasks of interchurch conversation, service, and witness to move forward.

(c) Of the two dimensions of the needfulness of the study of hermeneutics ;

(i) the clarification of the issues involved in all ecumenical conversation, and

(ii) assisting the missionary church in her efforts to "translate" faithfully and effectively her message,

the latter would seem the more pressing and the more promising as a theme for immediate further study.

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